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ABSTRACT

Successful college instruction programs have two features that are associated with increased grade point averages and retention: (1) they are comprehensive and meet student needs, and (2) they are better institutionalized into the academic mainstream of the college or university. Several program characteristics are crucial to learning improvement, including: goals and rationale, instructional methods, institutional standards, staff role, program evaluation, attitudes toward nontraditional students, responsiveness to students, and systematic advisement. Interaction and shared problem-solving among academic and developmental educators is the fundamental factor in successful learning improvement programs. Faculty and administrators can produce greater control of learning outcomes by considering all options, identifying the best methods, and fostering long-term planning, and interdisciplinary innovation. (LB)

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COLLEGE LEARNING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS*

*A digest of "Raising Academic Standards: A Guide to Learning Improvement," by Ruth Talbott Keimig (ED 233 669)

Improving the quality of learning by college students is basic to raising academic standards. There is no way for current students to succeed academically in sufficient numbers to ensure the survival of U.S. institutions and programs without improvement of instruction. Research findings provide a base of practical knowledge that can guide faculty and instructional planners to those practices that have a record of producing better learning. Successful tested strategies and key operating decisions have been analyzed and ranked in a guide for decisionmakers by Ruth Keimig (1983).

IN SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS, WHAT CHARACTERISTICS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH INCREASED GRADE POINT AVERAGES (GPA) AND RETENTION?

Despite many other differences, successful learning improvement programs share two essential characteristics.

- They are more comprehensive in the range of students' needs met.
- They are better institutionalized into the academic mainstream of the college or university.

WHAT TYPES OF LEARNING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS ARE GENERALLY USED?

Using the essential characteristics of comprehensiveness and institutionalization as the basis for differentiating programs, researchers have widely used and studied four basic program types. Most common and least effective are the Level I type, isolated remedial skills courses. In ascending order (for impact on GPA and retention) are programs that combine each of these additional elements with the basic skills courses:

- Level II, learning assistance to individual students;
- Level III, course-related supplementary learning activities for some objectives; and
- Level IV, comprehensive learning systems in academic courses.

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WHAT PROGRAM FEATURES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH IMPROVED GPA AND RETENTION?

Critical variables identified for learning improvement can be grouped in the following categories:

- goals and rationale
- instructional methods and content
- institutional policies and standards
- professional and paraprofessional staff and roles
- evaluation of learning improvement programs.

Even variables that do not seem related to achievement are important and can undercut the effectiveness of an institution's academic program. These variables include:

- the perception of the college's responsibility to the student
- the local rationale for learning services
- the attitude toward nontraditional students
- responsiveness to students
- prerequisite skills development
- course instructor's role
- direction of students into appropriate courses and services
- enforcement of competencies in academic courses, and
- use of systematic advisement procedures.

WHY IS LEARNING IMPROVEMENT BOUND TO INSTRUCTIONAL CHANGE?

The interdependence of two values--namely, improved learning and changed instruction--is the central message of the research literature. How to inculcate these values in a college or university is the central message of Keimig's guide. Implementation of change requires the active involvement of administrators, counselors, and faculty in addition to the developmental studies program staff.

Interaction and shared problem-solving among academic and developmental educators is the fundamental factor in successful learning improvement programs, producing gains in GPA and retention that cannot be delivered by remedial/developmental personnel working alone in remedial settings. Isolated developmental or remedial programs are often ineffective.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR AN INSTITUTION?

Through cooperative decisionmaking for existing programs, faculty and administrators can produce greater control of learning outcomes than is commonly perceived. Effective decisionmaking can:

- ensure the consideration of a full range of options,
- identify the best methods for bringing students to acceptable standards of achievement, and
- foster long-term planning, interdisciplinary innovation, and evolutionary change.

As one report put it, "The difficult task is to get overall thought and then to have the patience and the persistence to carry out its conclusions one at a time ..." (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1977). Keimig's guide provides research-based "overall thought" to guide the pragmatic educator's "piecemeal actions," through which instructional programs and change can be evolved.

FURTHER READING

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